

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Regd Charity No 283358

January/February
2015

providing
leadership
information and
Biblical teaching
Matthew 28:19-20

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Who Is God?

There's no doubt that the apostle Paul indelibly left his mark on the theology of the church. The perceptive Bible student will conclude that those who seek to undermine him simply don't want to believe him. Why not take his words at face value!

Guided by his contact with Jesus (Galatians 1:11-12), Paul focused on the *written* Word, strongly condemning the added traditions that marred the theology of the Pharisees and other Jewish sects—as condemned by Jesus. What was his approach to the Bible Sabbaths.

Christianity is hot-wired to the observation of a weekly rest day and to a series of annual 'holy days'. They serve to draw clear distinction from the other mainstream faiths: *Sunday* and not the Islamic Friday, *Christmas* and not the Hindu Diwali or the Islamic Ramadan, for example. Isn't it curious, though, that Paul endorses none of these? Not a word.

A Child of the Law

To come to grips with his doctrinal stance we need to understand Paul's background. He was uncompromisingly a Jew. That is, he was deeply immersed in the writings of what we call the Old Testament and in all that implied for life and theology, and he was diligent in its application. And recall that the early church had only those same Scriptures—no New Testament (II Timothy 3:15). Yet in Paul's writings we find no conflict with those Hebrew Scriptures.

Thus in *Acts* and in his *letters* we find Paul ardently promoting the 'Jewish' Sabbath and the Biblical holy days. Not surprising, for every Jew would in those days have given his or her life in defence of these days!

Sabbath Sign

The reason? It is found back in the book of Exodus: '*...Truly you shall*

keep My sabbaths. For it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, to know that I am Jehovah who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone that defiles it shall surely be put to death' (ch 31:13-14. Ezekiel 20:12). The death penalty! No wonder that the Jews, now returned from a seventy-year exile because of their Sabbath desecration, diligently observed it.

Note that the Sabbath is *a sign* - a sign that *Jehovah* is God. It sets Him apart from every other so-called god. It identifies the one true God who created all things: '*...It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever. For in six days Jehovah made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested, and was refreshed (Exodus 31:17). And Ezekiel: 'I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am Jehovah who sets them apart (Ezekiel 20:12).*

But—only for Israel? Consider this.

Universal Holy Day

The seventh day Sabbath was inaugurated at man's creation: '*...on the seventh day God ended His work which He had made. And He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He had rested from all His work which God created to make' Genesis 2:2-3).*

The Creator set the seventh day aside *for all mankind*—a day of rest and reflection and joy, a day to honour and worship the Creator, a holy day. A day that came direct from the hand of God for man's benefit. And note that it was so appointed before Adam did a stroke of work—so not just for physical rest! There's no reason to believe that the faithful didn't continue to observe it in those days—two thousand five hundred years! - until God formed His own nation, Israel.

Christian Observance

No surprise, then, that Paul and his contemporaries diligently observed this seventh day. And when the Gospel was first proclaimed it went first to Jews and proselytes (Gentiles who associated with Israel). No way did they relinquish the observance of the Sabbath! More, when the Gospel was embraced by non-Jews they, too, observed the weekly seventh day rest. Like ancient Israel, this set apart the first Christians—Jew and Gentile—to the one true God.

The apostle Paul, then ‘... according to [his] custom’ observed the seventh-day Sabbath. And before the Roman authorities he testified that he ‘...neither against the Law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything’ (Acts 25:8), and that he ‘...[believed] all things that are written in the Law and in the Prophets’ (24:14). Surely a ringing endorsement of the seventh-day Sabbath! In preaching to the Gentiles Paul never wavered from this position.

Holy Days

God has throughout history jealously guarded the days on which we offer Him formal worship, and when we can meet together in joyous fellowship and for instruction. A summary of these days is in Leviticus 23. What was Paul’s attitude to these annual observances? No surprise that he, as a Jew, continued their observance. But the apostle also taught God’s festivals to Gentiles as part of his proclamation of the Gospel. An example is his instruction to the Corinthian church—mostly Gentile.

Writing of the Spring festival, *Unleavened Bread*, he says: ‘...let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth’ (I Corinthians 5:8). In other words, observe the *Unleavened Bread* festival in both its physical and its spiritual aspects. The apostle together with other Christians is later recorded—in a Gentile area—as postponing a journey until ‘...after the Days of Unleavened Bread’ (Acts 20:6).

Writing to the Colossian Christians—also non-Jews, largely (v.13)—he urged them not to heed those who condemned their festival observance: ‘...Let no one, then, judge you in eating or in drinking, or in respect of a feast, or of a new moon, or of sabbaths, which are a shadow of the coming things, and the body is of the Christ’ (Colossians 2:16-17).

The festivals, now just mere ‘shadows’, portray in symbol—the realities of the divine plan, now, at a time when ‘...all we can see of God is like a cloudy picture in a mirror’ (I Corinthians 13:12 CEV). The challenge for every professing Christian is to ensure they are in harmony with this identifying sign of the one true God. Ω

Love and Law

Since man’s creation God—Jehovah—has had those who worship and serve Him in accordance with His prescribed form of worship, have conformed to His Laws and whose heart is right with Him. Even in the dark depths of Israel’s depraved idolatry there remained ‘...seven thousand men who had not bowed the knee to Baal’ (Romans 11:4).

The Old Testament records that many in Israel worshipped Him joyfully, influenced by His holy Spirit. But on *His* prescribed days, at the times and place *He* had revealed, and in a right spirit of repentance and awe. The book of Psalms reflects this. Yet by New Testament standards they had not been ‘converted’, with God’s Spirit implanted in their mind.

Spirit-led Obedience

Paul reminds us that: ‘...Moses describes the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which does those things shall live by them’ (Romans 10:5, Leviticus 18:5). Perfect life-long obedience to the whole Law has abundant rewards, but however feasible, that doesn’t happen! And even if someone were to achieve such a perfect life (Adam didn’t!), God says: ‘...by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight’ (Romans 3:20). For, ‘...by the law is the knowledge of sin’. The Law just points out what sin is, so we can work to change our thoughts and actions.

So, is someone who diligently and daily applies the Law to his or her life as best they can necessarily a true child of God? Do you need God’s in-dwelling Spirit to observe it? (There are, for example many Law-abiding men and women in the Jewish community.) The example of those seven thousand belies this! Remember that at that time ‘...The Spirit had not yet been given to anyone, since Jesus had not yet been given his full glory’ (John 7:39).

A Life Transformed

As Paul states ‘...love is the fulfilling of the law’ (Romans 13:10). Certainly, the preeminent fruit of the Spirit is *love*. Perfect love is a fruit of the in-dwelling Spirit in the believer, and means we do *from the heart* all that God’s Law requires of us. Because we may obey God’s instructions doesn’t mean we truly love! A *change of heart* is central.

Each of us is judged by Jesus Christ with compassion, with regard to our level of understanding, with mercy. For, ‘...we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession, for we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need’ (Hebrews 4: 14-16).

As writes the apostle Paul: ‘... be not conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, in order to prove by you what is the good and pleasing and perfect will of God’ (Romans 12:2). Ω

Prophecy Alert!

Scattered through the text of the Gospels— notably in Matthew chapter twenty-four—we find Jesus providing indicators as to what we should note concerning the approach of the ‘last days’. He advises us to ‘watch’: ‘...Therefore watch; for you do not know what hour your Lord comes’ (eg Matthew 24:42).

This has become embedded in the mind of many believers as ‘*watch world news, watch world events*’. So embedded, indeed, that many spend endless hours poring over the minutiae of broadcast and published news. ‘Prophecy buffs’ endlessly record every event as a fulfillment of one or other statement by Jesus or his apostles.

Yet years pass and the supposedly momentous events become but a footnote of history, superseded by, for example, by the death of a ‘person of prophetic interest’, or the unexpected demise of a Pope, or the overthrow of a government that is seen as key to a particular prophetic interpretation. One church group has been diligently ‘watching world news’ since the early 1970s, only to be frustrated time and again! Trying to tell if this is now the end time by reading the mass of prophetic interpretations is a bit like trying to tell

the time by watching the second hand!

Jesus did say *watch*—‘be vigilant, keep awake’. It means, as Jesus in parable: ‘... *know this, that if the steward of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched and would not have allowed his house to be dug through. Therefore you also be ready, for in that hour you think not, the Son of Man comes*’ (vv.43-44). But, of course, we *don’t* know when! How, then, can we ‘be ready’?

Be Prepared

We must heed the words of Jesus: ‘...*Be ready and keep your lamps burning just like those servants who wait up for their master to return from a wedding feast. As soon as he comes and knocks, they open the door for him. Servants are fortunate if their master finds them awake and ready when he comes!*’ (Luke 12:35-37 CEV).

The Christian life is a roller-coaster ride of successes and set-backs as we daily strive to shape our character to reflect that of Jesus our Saviour. But also knowing that the ‘support system’ for the ride is underpinned by our faithful Saviour and our loving heavenly Father. Let’s Look to them and not to the ever-changing fickle flow of the distorted news services. Ω

Memories

The ‘ghost of Christmas past’ continues to haunt Christians who understand the true circumstances of the birth of our Saviour. Especially, perhaps, those who come later in life to the correct details of its timing and circumstances. For it is an emotional time, as is any birth—and how much so that of the Saviour of the world.

Add in the exalted place that children have been given in the celebration—toys galore (in affluent ‘Christian’ nations only!), indulgence, school crib scenes, sparkling lights on the tree, parties, angels, the inevitable big lie—Santa. A magic time indeed, even for adults.

The sound of Christmas hymns evokes memories of childhood and the tears well up as ‘Silent night’ is

relayed endlessly from thousands of supermarkets across the land, and from the radio. Nostalgic, indeed. (Many songs, though, cause tears of irritation!)

All conspire to raise an emotional response that the enlightened Christian tries to resist, at some cost. And peer pressure from family, friends and work colleagues is not helpful. Even though we know the facts as to when, and the unbiblical source of the attendant artifacts (trees, Santas, heathen time for worship—Saturnalia *etc.*).

It’s My Birthday

The timing, of course, is wrong—as every cleric knows. But we *can* pinpoint the correct date—though it is tied to the calendar then in use in Israel, and varies yearly on our modern calendar. This year, 2015, for example, it falls on September 28th, the first day of the *Feast of Tabernacles*.

That’s the date when we should celebrate this momentous event: *God became man and relinquished his glory with the Father—for us, on that date*. We can rejoice as did the angelic host at his birth (Luke 2:9-13 - texts to savour and meditate upon!). Ω

Request the article *Feast of the Nativity* or download at: <http://www.cgom.org/Publications/Articles/TheFeastOfTheNativity.pdf>

Annual Festivals 2015

Lord’s Supper	April 2 <i>after sundown</i>
Unleavened Bread	April 4—10
Pentecost	May 24
Trumpets	September 14
Atonement	September 23
Tabernacles	Sept 28—Oct 4
Eighth Day	October 5

What Is It?

What day is the Sabbath? Obvious, assert most of the Christian faith—*Sunday*. Wrong, say Jews and other millions of the Christian persuasion. It is, they say, Saturday, the *seventh* day of our week. Who is right? A surprising clue is found in ‘bread’!

Well, not exactly bread as we know it, but in the ‘bread’ with which the Creator miraculously fed the people of Israel day in and day out for forty years in a barren and dry wilderness. It was called ‘*manna*’.

You probably know the story. As provisions ran out following their departure from Egypt the people had a moan—‘...*we’re starving*’. The miracle-working God had the answer. (He likes us to ask for our needs so we can understand the source of His loving care for us. And even if we moan He provides for us!) He sent them flesh in the form of an abundance of exhausted quails resting around their encampment, ripe for gathering. And *manna*.

A Test

When they first saw it, the *manna*, the question was ‘...*what is it?*’ (‘*man na*’ is supposedly Egyptian for those words.) God used the miracle as ‘a test’ of their willingness to accept Him as their Captain, and do as He requires. (Exodus 16:4). Just as He had tested our first parents with the fruit of a tree.

So—the test? Will my people be willing to quit their Egyptian idolatrous practices and observe My Sabbath as I have appointed it? For this seventh-day Sabbath is My identifying sign (Exodus 31:13-14).

Down rained the manna for several days. Then Moses let it be known that on the sixth day of the week they were to gather twice the amount as there wouldn’t be any on the seventh day, His Sabbath. He told them that they should leave a portion *uncooked* without fear of the manna corrupting (v.23). It *didn’t* rot, as predicted (v.24). Clearly the daily portions had been left aside uncooked. Some of the people went out on Sabbath morning to gather manna. Tough—there was

Manna

The *manna* was like a kind of grain, white, tiny, hard. To become edible it needed to be ‘... *ground in mills, or beat in a mortar, and baked in pans, and made into cakes*’ (Numbers 11:-8). They had to gather a fixed quantity per person, and to cook only the amount they needed for each day.

The people were warned not to leave any of it overnight, but ‘...*some of them left of it until the morning. And it became rotten with maggots, and stank*’ (Exodus 16:20).

The uncooked leftover from the *sixth* day miraculously *didn’t* rot (v.24).

Letter from England

Hello from Lincoln

I imagine that a section of our readers consider that our teachings—those of the *Outreach Ministries*—are *heresy*! In a sense they are right—for the meaning of the word (Gk. *heresis*) is simply a sect, a group or party. (Though even *sect* has today a negative image!)

Paul, too, was so accused: ‘...*after the Way [the mode of worship] which they call heresy [a sect of Judaism], so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things that are written in the Law and in the Prophets*’ (Acts 24:14). Paul, in other words, was simply being accused of being the ring-leader of a separate sect of Judaism (v.5). Which he here denies, for he didn’t deviate from the written Word of the Scriptures. In so doing he simply reflected the words of Jesus: ‘...*Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to destroy but to fulfill*’ (Matthew 5:19).

Heresy, however, in our time has come to mean a *false* teaching. Given the kaleidoscopic variety of teaching within ‘Christianity’ how do we recognize what is indeed heretical in that modern sense—*that is*, false? It is important to know, for—as our lead article points out—we could end up worshipping the wrong ‘god’. Or at least being involved in destructive religious syncretism (the blending of two faiths).

The ancient House of Israel (the northern conglomeration of ten tribes) were exiled for embracing the pagan idolatry of the Canaanite nations. They were replaced in the Land by displaced refugees expelled from their homeland. These people groups each brought with them their own idolatrous slant on religion—but added elements of Israel’s beliefs (which were themselves mixed with idolatry!): ‘...*They feared Jehovah and served their own gods, according to the custom of the nations whom they removed from there*’. Our readers can read the background in II Kings chapter seventeen.

The lesson is that God—our ‘jealous’ God—has one way for us to approach Him in worship to which we had best pay heed. Modern Christianity has padded the true faith with idolatrous traditions, and as noted by Jude, the brother of Jesus: ‘...*I had need to write to you to exhort you to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints*’ (Jude 3). That faith is relayed to us in the Scriptures. It is the desire of the *Outreach Ministries* to faithfully reflect that faith.

James

none. (Why don’t we believe what God has to say to us!) There was no doubt as to which day is Sabbath.

So on Sabbath morning there would have been throughout the encampment the clattering of mills and pans as they busily prepared and cooked the manna into cakes! (They had done their ‘shopping’ the previous day!) 